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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT FIRES SECRETARY AS FIRST STEP IN  
ANTI-CORRUPTION CAMPAIGN

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Classified By: Pol/Econ Chief Silvia Eiriz for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (U) On February 4, the President's spokesperson issued a communique, which he read on television, announcing that one of the President's secretaries, Emilienne Blehon Gome, was charged in court with using her position to extort 65,542,610 CFA (circa USD 131,000) from a mobile telephone company, MTN. The communique stated that she was fired from her job and that the President has never authorized anyone to solicit funds from businesses in his name or on his behalf. The communique also said that the President's staff, relatives, and friends who engage in such activities will be prosecuted. The communique noted that the activities of the Presidency are solely financed by the treasury and encouraged the public to report any such activities to the police.

¶2. (C) During a meeting with Emboff on February 5, Presidential spokesperson Gervais Coulibaly refused to tell Emboff how the Presidency became aware of the extortion, but admitted that it was not law enforcement that brought it to their attention. Coulibaly said that President Gbagbo decided to make an example of Gome, a close relative of Gbagbo's, in order to make it clear that he upholds good governance and opposes interference with economic activity. Coulibaly told Emboff that the President will clean house and that similar cases will follow because the President wants to ensure that no one can accuse him or his circle of corruption during the election. According to Coulibaly, Gbagbo is not motivated by money or luxury goods and cited his repeated refusal to be bought off by Cote d'Ivoire's founding father Felix Houphouet Boigny.

¶3. (C) Coulibaly told Emboff that President Gbagbo sincerely wants elections as soon as possible in order to benefit from what could be termed the "conflict dividend." Coulibaly explained that many Ivoirians admire Gbagbo for preventing the Forces Nouvelles from taking over the country as well as for having devised the mechanism (the Ouagadougou Political Agreement) that will solve the crisis. According to this analysis, the longer the election is delayed, the smaller the electoral gain to Gbagbo as savior of the nation. Coulibaly admitted that as Cote d'Ivoire returns to normalcy, citizens will begin to focus on their standard of living. Coulibaly argued that Gbagbo has been unable to effectively govern the country because he is saddled with a national reconciliation government that includes ministers from opposition parties who obstruct his agenda; this is another reason why he wants the election held as soon as possible.

¶4. (U) On February 5, the Ministry of Interior issued a statement announcing that MTN's Director General, Aimable Mpore, had been given 5 days to leave the country for discrediting the President by recording a donation to the chief of state in MTN's account books. According to the Interior Ministry's communique, Gome requested the funds on behalf of the President to provide a health clinic and ambulance to the residents of Ahounienfoutou village, located in the central-east of the country. Sixteen persons died in that village in November 2008 as a result of food poisoning and Gbagbo visited the village personally after the tragedy.

¶5. (C) Comment: We suspect there is more to this case than meets the eye. It is highly unusual for the government to

expel a businessman, and many suspect that it is to keep him quiet. Gbagbo's handling of this case is reminiscent in some ways of his crackdown on cocoa sector officials last year. It appears to demonstrate that he will not hesitate to punish his cronies, even those closest to him, if he believes that their greed has unduly damaged the public image he wants to cultivate. It is true that Gbagbo does not show signs of wanting to accumulate vast quantities of money, luxury cars, and mansions for his personal use. This, however, seems not to be the case for some in his inner circle. Gbagbo seems to have a real distaste for some acts of corruption and a genuine commitment to fighting corruption in those instances - but his eagerness to take action has not gone beyond a certain realm. Whether he will be successful in promoting a squeaky clean image to win re-election is hard to tell but it is interesting that this is the issue he has chosen to champion. End Comment.

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